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ABSTRACT

To help guide family literacy program developers in shaping their curriculum, and educators and community leaders in creating independent parenting programs, this digest describes the parenting education component of successful urban programs. In general, family literacy programs have three basic components: adult education, parenting education, and early childhood education for preschoolers. The parenting skills component of family literacy programs generally includes training parents to be their children's primary teachers and full partners in the children's education and interactive literacy activities involving parents and their children. Usual places of service, curricula, staffing, and ancillary services are described. Ongoing evaluation that includes the perspectives of participants helps ensure the efficacy of a program. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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Number 144, June 1999

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON URBAN EDUCATION

DIGEST

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FAMILY LITERACY STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Parents' literacy skills, along with their attitudes about learning and formal education, have an immense impact on their children's academic achievement. Poor parents, despite few opportunities for education or bad school experiences, are still often able to foster their children's development through innate, nontraditional literacy activities. However, they may be unable to help them in ways that support and enhance the school's education program (Taylor, 1993).

To provide parents with skills that increase their verbal and math literacy, and to assist them in promoting their children's educational development, local family literacy programs operate throughout the country. Many are supported by the Federal Even Start Family Literacy Program, authorized in 1988 to fund local partnerships that provide instruction to low-income parents. Even Start now supports more than 637 projects reaching 34,400 families (Tao, Gamse, & Tarr, 1998). Some are independent single-site centers that were created by local educators and activists in direct response to community needs. Others, established by national organizations that receive additional funding from private foundations, largely adhere to a pre-established curriculum and structure (Come & Fredericks, 1995; National Center for Family Literacy, NCFL, 1994).

Most evaluations of family literacy programs have found them to be effective in developing the skills of both parents and children (NCFL, 1994; Tao et al., 1998). Therefore, to help guide family literacy program developers in shaping their curriculum, and educators and community leaders in creating independent parenting programs, this digest describes the parenting education component of successful urban programs.

General Program Principles

Family literacy programs have three basic components: ***adult education***, which comprises instruction in reading, writing, computing, and problem-solving, and may also include English as a Second Language and GED classes and jobs skills training; ***parenting education***, which helps families actively participate in their children's education at home and at school; and ***early childhood education*** for preschoolers.

Participants in family literacy programs are ethnically and culturally diverse, speak a variety of native languages, and, increasingly, are teenage parents and very poor. In many urban areas, they are refugees whose native countries had little traditional literacy, and whose past includes physically or emotionally debilitating experiences. Despite such personal challenges, families have a wide range of experienced-based knowledge that can inform program development. Thus, developers have found it useful to draw on the strengths, interests, concerns, and goals of diverse families by involving them in the design, implementation, and evaluation of their own and their children's learning programs. They respect and incorporate into the program families' naturally-occurring literacy activities and traditions, including, as appropriate, their intergenerational orientation. Such collaboration with parents facilitates learning by maximizing participants' familiarity with curriculum topics and increasing their self-confidence and feelings of empowerment. It also produces a group identity and a safe and supportive atmosphere for sharing concerns, and promotes attendance and retention. Finally, collaboration helps disenfranchised families believe that personal literacy development will improve their family's lives and overcome their feelings of powerless (Dwyer, 1995; Gadsden, 1996; NCFL, 1994).

Parenting Skills Component

The parenting skills component of family literacy programs generally comprises: (1) training parents to be their children's primary teacher and full partners in the children's education, and (2) interactive literacy activities involving parents and their children (Benjamin & Lord, 1996).

Place of Service

Most programs provide services both at their centers and in the families' home. Families learn through field trips and informal activities off site. Literacy learning at all locations is connected to the instruction at centers, with much of it provided in the context of early childhood development, parenting, use of community resources, and employment.

During home visits staff members build trust; learn about a family's naturally-occurring literacy activities, such as storytelling; demonstrate how literacy education can occur in any place and at any time; and help parents develop new literacy strategies to encourage their children's development. For example, staff can help families make television viewing a learning and interactive experience that develops critical thinking skills (Parker & Wuelser, 1995).

Center spaces that house parenting classes and family literacy activities promote comfort, sharing of insights and information, and creativity, through furnishings such as couches and work tables for group projects. Many have kitchens and dining areas because meal preparation and communal meals are venues for learning a variety of skills. Available resources include adult learning materials on parenting and other topics, and children's books and toys (Dwyer, 1995; Thomas, 1995).

Curriculum

The most engaging curriculum, activities, and learning materials provide valuable and useful information about parenting, respond to participants' needs and interests, and are culturally and linguistically relevant. While learning in groups is most effective, staff can also offer one-to-one sessions to deal with sensitive issues or provide additional instruction.

Topics. Parents' own view of their children's abilities, including literacy, is a useful departure point for discussion (Perkins & Strutchens, 1994). Curriculum topics that provide good opportunities for learning and applying a variety of skills include the following (Dwyer, 1995; NCFL, 1994):

- Attitudes about child-rearing, including behavior management.

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- Strategies for problem-solving, with particular attention to parent-child concerns.
- Strategies for transferring learning to various situations at home and at work.
- Household management, including integrating employment into parents' schedules.
- Family relationships, including abuse.
- Ways to learn about one's own child.

Activities. All parent-child activities have a literacy component, and parents are encouraged to see routine family interactions as opportunities for literacy experiences. They are also instructed in specific ways to reinforce their children's learning in the early childhood component (Come & Frederick, 1995).

A key activity is parent-child reading. Preferably, books are selected by parents; reflect different cultures, including those of the participants; and provide readers with the opportunity to learn about a variety of topics, as well as learn to read (Perkins & Strutchens, 1994). A Savannah, GA, program, for example, uses guest speakers, including former program participants, to provide parents with tips on how to read and discuss books with their children, despite their own perceived shortcomings. It also provides families with books for home use and a calendar on which to chart family progress (Come & Fredericks, 1995). Writing, designing, and producing publications in class promotes development of many skills and also allows families to share information. Subjects can include story books, recipe collections, autobiographies and family histories, and the program's "news of the week" (Wrigley, 1994).

Oral skills are promoted through role playing and skits. Different ways to solve a problem is a useful theme. For example, in New York City, participants in the El Barrio Popular Education Program produced a *foto-novela* illustrating the families' concerns about local schools (Wrigley, 1994).

To give families the opportunity to interact with people from a range of backgrounds, and to learn from experts in a specific area, people working in the community can be invited to make a presentation and lead a discussion. Guests can include public health and social services professionals and police officers, especially those involved in gang prevention (Wrigley, 1994).

Visits to cultural centers give families the opportunity to learn about a particular topic, and to consider their own community's contribution to culture, the contributions of other communities, and the general societal value of culture. Looking at sculptures, for example, promotes art appreciation and provides an opportunity to learn about human anatomy. To promote science learning, families walk around the neighborhood to look for nature items and to see how everyday life is based on scientific principles. Using public transportation helps parents, immigrants especially, become familiar with their city and aware of how to travel safely with their children (Parker & Wuelser, 1995; Wrigley, 1994).

Staffing

In addition to a wide overall knowledge of family literacy and early childhood education, teacher characteristics shown to be effective with disadvantaged families include the ability to convey respect for the life experiences of participants, and to communicate in a way that builds parents' self-confidence and self-respect. In addition, "flexibility in trying alternative learner-centered teaching strategies" and in responding to changing circumstances is a an important staff quality (Thomas, 1995, p. 24).

Ancillary Services

Through relationships with social service agencies, programs help meet a range of necessary, but non-educational, needs to induce program participation, ensure access to health services, and reduce family stress. Many also provide transportation, day care, and meals. To promote learning outside the program, staff helps familiarize families with community literacy resources, such as the public library and museums (Dwyer, 1995).

Feedback and Evaluation

An ongoing evaluation that includes participants' perspectives helps ensure a program's efficacy. Learning goals established collaboratively at the outset can guide the evaluation. Parents' perceptions can be obtained through individual interviews, recorded group sessions, and personal journals. Routine staff evaluations can include regular recording of observations during family literacy sessions (Thomas, 1995). A review of participants' portfolios can offer tangible evidence of learning and improvement (Perkins & Strutchens, 1994). Parent and child test scores, a requirement for Even Start-funded programs, can provide a basis for more formal periodic evaluations in all programs (Tao et al., 1998).

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